

Richland Electric Coop Community Solar And Other Energy Bargains

While some families in Wisconsin with savings ready to invest are challenged to find profitable, on-site and community solar options, they are on the rise in our area. Rural Electric coops, in particular, are locating community solar farms next to substations where all of the solar power flows into local communities insuring that CO2 reduction will be maximized, stress on local electric lines will be eased and costs to investors are kept competitive.

Two years ago, members of Vernon Electric Coop assessed the estimated savings for a community solar proposal and purchased all 1000 panels on the farm near Westby in just two weeks. Recently, following a similar concept, Richland Electric Coop announced community solar with terms that are very comparable.

Under both contracts, participating coop members buy the solar power from a specified number of panels for 25 years at an upfront cost very close to \$2 per watt. The generated solar power is credited on one's electric bill at the same rate one pays for regular power. This means the value of the solar power will increase with inevitable electricity cost boosts. Increases over the last 10 years have averaged 4.5% per year in Wisconsin and this rate should persist due to high spending by utilities on capital expenses such as transmission expansion that are paid off over 30-40 years.

Unlike Vernon's solar panels which are fixed in one position, the solar panels being installed east of Viola near the intersection of County Road A and Highway 56 will track the sun in one axis from east to west producing an additional 11% of power per installed watt. Vernon Electric allowed its members to buy power equal to their average electricity use while Richland Coop has set the maximum at one half of current use in order to allow more customers to participate. The solar farm near Viola will be owned by a solar developer while Vernon Electric Coop solar customers retain the option to fully own panels and continue receiving benefits after the 25 year initial period. Both plans accommodate moving, transfer of property and other flexibilities.

For a household averaging 700 kWh of use per month, nine solar panels would produce the maximum 50% or 350 kWh per month and cost about \$6,200. Under 4.5% per year inflation, the investment would eliminate about \$27,000 in payments-- roughly the same as a CD earning 6% per year. For a household averaging 330 kWh of use per month, the maximum would be four solar panels costing \$2,800 and eliminating about \$13,000 in electricity payments over the next 25 years. Richland coop members can sign-up by stopping in at Richland Electric Coop or calling 647-4265. More details can be found at: <http://bit.ly/RichlandSolarFAQ>.

In March, Dairyland Power Coop acknowledged they will look into the possibility of offering similar community deals at two other solar farms planned near Hillsboro and Liberty Pole but only if they get enough interest expressed from Vernon Electric coop members. There is no formal plan at this time, so act fast.

For members who can locate solar where they live or work, both coops offer Wisconsin-leading terms for behind-the-meter installations. The upfront cost will be around 50% more but savings are still significant and it is possible to plan the system to incorporate battery storage later down the road as costs drop.

Going solar at home and moving “off-grid” will become increasingly possible over the next 25 years largely because sizes of required solar installations will drop as our houses and business run on less and less power.

The U.S. Department of Energy and manufacturers have agreed to technical requirements that will insure new air-conditioners will use 50% less power by 2023. Internet-linked hot water tanks and thermostats for heating and cooling will reduce use during high demand when energy costs are higher and capital expense is created. Greenheck Fan in Wisconsin is already manufacturing motors and fans that use a small fraction of the power of the components they replace.

Though solar gets a lot of attention, using less power is far more cost effective at reducing CO2 than installing any type of renewable energy. Vernon Electric is currently offering free home energy audits to help members locate and eliminate waste.

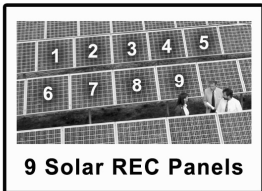
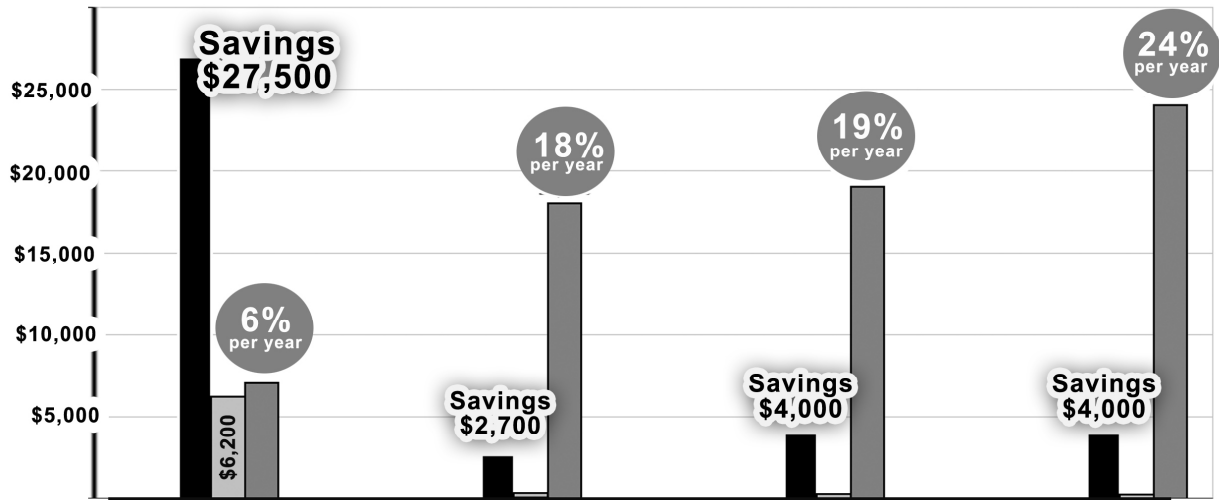
An average household without savings to invest in solar today can still avoid paying more than \$10,000 over the same 25 years by converting from incandescent to LED lighting and using two very productive conservation practices. The measures require using LED bulbs in ten commonly used fixtures, installing \$20 showerheads that stream water more efficiently and turning the hot water tank temperature down from 130 to 110 degrees. With \$1500-\$2000 to invest, rural houses can change from electric hot water to the new “hot water on demand” design that runs on propane. An average family using 700 kWh per month will avoid about \$6000 in energy bills over 25 years and reduce associated carbon emissions by two-thirds or more.

The area we live in contains many inventive people who have found ingenious ways to conserve. Speaking up, comparing energy bills and sharing solutions unleashes a potential far greater than we realize.

S.O.U.L. of Wisconsin has a free energy investment calculator that can be obtained by requesting it at info@soulwisconsin.org

By Rob Danielson
Secretary, SOUL of Wisconsin
La Farge, WI 625-4949

25 Year Savings from Energy Investments



9 Solar REC Panels

\$6200



10 LED Bulbs

\$40



Set Hot Water 110 F

\$0-\$50



Low Flow Shower Head

\$20